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Viewing cable 09SOFIA264, BULGARIAN ELECTIONS: GARBAGE IN, GARBAGE OUT

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| Reference ID | Created | Released | Classification | Origin |
|----------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------------------|---------------|
| 09SOFIA264 | 2009-06-02 08:34 | 2011-08-30 01:44 | CONFIDENTIAL | Embassy Sofia |

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SIPDIS

FOR EUR/NCE ERIC GAUDIOSI, TOM YEAGER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/02/2019

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SUBJECT: BULGARIAN ELECTIONS: GARBAGE IN, GARBAGE OUT

Classified By: Ambassador Nancy McEldowney for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Bulgaria is staggering toward the finish line of a tawdry year-long campaign that has ushered in new lows in mudslinging and slander. Neither of the top two contenders, Sofia Mayor Borissov and Socialist PM Stanishev, have any chance of winning an absolute majority. The real drama will be over their relative margins, as the smaller parties scramble to compete as coalition partners. A grand coalition between Borissov's GERB party and the Socialists is now the most likely scenario, an outcome that promises further corruption, lack of vision, and a limited lifespan. Behind the scenes, President Parvanov is hedging his bets with contingency planning for a "technocratic" government that would position him and his business cronies as the dominant players. END SUMMARY.

Two Elections, One Campaign

¶2. (C) The European Parliamentary campaign, officially kicked-off on May 16, has been dominated by domestic rather than European issues, as the parties jockey for position before the more important July 5 national race. Corruption and the economy have been the main themes of what is essentially a single, year-long campaign. There has been virtually no debate on the issues, and the campaign has degenerated to personal attacks reaching new lows even for Bulgaria.

¶3. (C) The result is that most voters want nothing to do with the elections and turn-out is expected to reach historic lows. This accrues to the direct benefit of protest parties such as the extreme-nationalist Ataka. A low turn-out is also likely to cause the demise of ex-King Simeon's party, which may drop out of the national election if it fails to get a seat in the European parliament.

The Main Contenders

¶4. (C) THE BULGARIAN SOCIALIST PARTY (BSP): No one expects the BSP to take first place, but it can make a strong enough showing to bargain its way into the next government. The BSP can claim some real achievements during the last term, including EU accession and fiscal stability. But conflicting interests within the coalition and within the BSP itself paralyzed structural reform efforts, leaving a mixed government record that eroded support for the Socialists. Last year's high-level corruption scandals and subsequent EU sanctions brought BSP ratings to new lows. Despite internal quarrels, the BSP is presenting a united front for the elections and, following the advice of its U.S. consultancy

firm Greenberg Carville Shrum (GCS), has made Borissov's personality the key issue in their predominantly negative campaign.

¶5. (C) CITIZENS FOR THE EUROPEAN DEVELOPMENT OF BULGARIA (GERB): With a roughly 10-percent lead over BSP, GERB will win the largest share of votes but not a majority and will have to find partners to form a government. Though it calls itself center-right and uses pro-Western rhetoric, the party is really the one-man show of its founder and leader Boyko Borissov, former Interior Ministry Chief Secretary and bodyguard to Todor Zhivkov. Borissov's mixed record at the Ministry, alleged past ties with underworld figures, and unimpressive Sofia city management have not undermined his popularity. His strongest weapons are his straight talk and tough-guy personality. Campaigning on the slogan "Let's Show that Bulgaria Can," GERB vows greater transparency in policy making and swift actions against corruption. But lacking a plan and a seasoned team of policy experts to implement it, and saddled with Borissov's erratic and autocratic leadership style, GERB will find it hard to seize the reigns of leadership should it come to power. GERB's preferred coalition partner would be the Blue Coalition, which could provide badly needed experienced personnel.

Ataka and MRP: Each Other's Best Enemy

¶6. (C) MOVEMENT FOR RIGHTS AND FREEDOM (MRF): Local analysts say Ataka and MRF need each other to frighten their constituents into voting. The MRF enjoys solid support from Bulgaria's ethnic Turkish minority. Its ability to consistently deliver the ethnic Turkish vote gives it influence disproportionate to its size, especially when turnout is low. MRF's autocratic leader, Ahmed Dogan, is credited with keeping ethnic peace during the transition but now uses the party as a vehicle for money-making. The party's alleged abuse of EU funds in MRF-controlled

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ministries are major factors in the party's negative public image and the current government's low approval ratings. MRF will return to parliament with roughly the same numbers, possibly more if turnout is low. But this year it may have to compete for its past role as kingmaker with Ataka or OLJ.

¶7. (SBU) ATAKA: The surprise success of the 2005 parliamentary elections, Ataka continues to attract extremists from the left and right, former army and security officers, and those embittered by the transition to a market economy. The party's rhetoric is anti-Semitic, anti-NATO and EU, anti-U.S., anti-government and anti-minority (ethnic Turks and Roma). Ataka is the only party to use an EU issue in its campaign: it is against allowing Turkey to join the EU. High profile scandals centered on the autocratic leader Volen Siderov have not undermined electoral support. Polling at about 10 percent, Ataka is certain to return to the European and national parliaments. If not acceptable as a coalition partner, it may still play kingmaker offering informal support to a minority government.

Lucky to Cross the Threshold

¶8. (SBU) THE BLUE COALITION: UDF and DSB are remnants of the once powerful Union of Democratic Forces that led post-communist changes in Bulgaria. Formed last March, the Blue alliance is a last-ditch attempt to save the genuine center-right, which has become marginalized by corruption scandals and ego clashes, many surrounding ex-PM Ivan Kostov. The parties hope their reluctant and belated union will regain the center-right voters who have stopped going to the polls or defected to GERB. If they cross the parliamentary threshold, they can hope to enter government in coalition with Mayor Borissov's GERB. But the center-right campaign is dogged by a high profile legal battle over court registration. UDF leaders blame their troubles on court manipulation by the Socialists and hope the ongoing controversy will motivate center-right voters to go to the polls.

¶9. (SBU) NATIONAL MOVEMENT FOR STABILITY AND PROGRESS (NMS): The party of former King Simeon has been declining steadily since its defeat in the 2005 election. To stay in government the party joined the BSP as a junior partner in the current ruling coalition, a move that further eroded its core support. Its ratings are now below the margin of error.

¶10. (C) ORDER, LAW AND JUSTICE (OLJ): A new player on the domestic political scene, OLJ is centered on Yanev Yanev, dubbed the clown of Bulgarian politics. Yanev rose to prominence in recent months by outrageous media claims. Yanev has found enough cash from unclear sources to bankroll top flight consultants for his campaign under the motto Let's Stop Corruption. OLJ relies on crude populist rhetoric similar to that of GERB and Ataka. Most analysts believe Yanev is a creation of BSP circles designed to take votes away from GERB and Ataka. Yanev claims OLJ has 38,000 members and a national organization. But lacking Borisso's charisma and Siderov's drive, there are already signs his popularity has peaked.

¶11. (C) LADER: The business party of energy oligarch Hriso Kovachki had momentum several months ago when several tiny but respectable center-right parties joined its Forward coalition. But after a falling out with these partners, Leader is again alone as its polling numbers are back within the margin of error. LEADER should not be counted out, given its vote-buying success in last year's local elections and talk of a reconstituted coalition in time for the national elections.

And If They Cannot Form a Government

¶12. (C) If the parties cannot form a government there are two options. The President may appoint a caretaker government and schedule new elections within two months. Most parties believe results of a second election would not differ from the first and so would rather avoid this option. The second option, which has been gathering increasing attention, is a government of technocrats or well-connected business people, a list of experts acceptable to all sides and approved by a majority of the new parliament. Though the parties -- via the parliament -- approve the list of ministers, the selection process is outside normal party procedure and not transparent, allowing more outside influence. Bulgaria had one previous Program Government, formed in 1992, an ineffective and highly corrupt entity widely believed to do the bidding of a major organized crime group. The idea of such a government is not popular with the

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public or parties, but President Parvanov and business interests related to him are promoting the idea as a way to increase their own influence. The parties may find it appealing to let a technocrat government take the blame for the effects of the world financial crisis, expected to hit with full force later this year.
McEldowney